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Heart of a Dog, by Mikhail Bulgakov

by William Berkhout

(Honors History 1120)

In his quirky novel, *Heart of a Dog*, Mikhail Bulgakov offers a metaphoric view of life within the early years of the Soviet Union. Bulgakov illustrates this examination by following the activities of a homeless mongrel dog, Sharik, and a prominent doctor, Professor Philip Philippovich Preobrazhensky. Written in 1925, only eight years after the revolution that ended over 300 years of Tsarist rule, *Heart of a Dog* provides a chilling foreshadowing of the changes and struggles that will be faced by the Russian people for more than the next half century, as well as an optimistic view toward Russia's future.

Bulgakov uses the character Sharik clearly as a manifestation of the Russian people before, during, and after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. We are first introduced to Sharik on the street as he shakes miserably in the cold of the brutal Russian winter. Not only is he without a home, food, or hope, but, due to a cruel proletarian cook at the People's Central Economic Soviet dumping boiling water on him, he is missing the fur on one side of his body. With only half the protection he once enjoyed he is now vulnerable to the savagery of his environment. With his use of Sharik as an embodiment of the newly formed Soviet state, Bulgakov is expressing the fact that through the revolution and the destruction of the protection the country was accustomed to under Tsarist rule, though free, they are still a wounded nation enjoying only a fraction of the defense they once knew. His use of a proletarian cook expresses the fact that this damage was administered by the revolutionaries in power at the time.

Professor Philip Philippovich, along with his assistant, Dr. Ivan Arnoldovich Bormenthal, personify the remnants of the ideals, intellectual importance, and customs within pre-revolutionary Russia. Philip Philippovich's apartment, containing seven rooms, is largely uncharacteristic of Russian living space after the revolution. Upon returning to his apartment building with Sharik, Philip Philippovich is greeted by his doorman who informs him that a newly elected building committee had just moved new tenants into an apartment, explaining that partitions would be made to accommodate the new tenants. The outrage expressed by Philip Philippovich parallels the sentiment felt by those in disagreement with the new Bolshevik mandates. His fury is more clearly expressed when the new house management committee, a symbol of the new Bolshevik authority, comes to his apartment to inform him that they have voted to annex two of his rooms for new tenants. The Bolshevik insistence upon not wavering from orders and their devotion to hierarchal authority could be seen. Bulgakov demonstrates this as the committee, clearly outwitted and defeated in the argument, would not stray from their insistence to commandeer the rooms until Philip Philippovich contacted the Chairman of the house committee, a patient of his, and threatened to give up his practice and potentially leave the country.

The events surrounding the transplantation and transformation of Sharik are allegorical of the transformation within Russian society following the Bolshevik seizure of the country. On the morning of the procedure the unknowing Sharik had a premonition that the events of the day would be life changing and potentially devastating. This is reflective of the sentiment felt throughout Russia before the revolution, a country reeling from tremendous losses suffered during the First World War. It was also a nation losing faith in its current regime, leading many to question the direction of its rulers. The violent and gory descriptions of the surgery are synonymous with the quick and vicious way the lowly Bolsheviks rose to power. The identity of the human, of whom the

vital parts were taken and transplanted into the dog, was described as someone uneducated, brutish, and almost criminal. This description was on a par with the collective mentality of the Bolsheviks. The metamorphosis after the surgery corresponds to that of Russia shortly after the revolution, a quick transformation of an “old dog” of a state into one which was seen as more cosmopolitan; one for the people.

As Sharik grows more human, he begins to exhibit crude and unsophisticated behavior. While the Bolsheviks were very loyal to their cause, they were ill equipped to sustain themselves without employing the aid of the undereducated peasantry and lower classes. Though they insisted on educating the populace, they perpetrated this by instilling fierce control over the education provided. Anything that did not aid the cause was deemed unnecessary. Bulgakov displayed this in Sharik’s consistent rejection of the instruction Philip Philippovich and Dr. Bormenthal tried to instill upon him as well as his insistence upon being renamed Polygraph Polygraphovich Sharikov.

The infusion of the peasantry and lower classes into the Bolshevik cause had unforeseen costs. While a miniscule percentage of the population of pre-revolutionary Russia was wealthy and educated, they were still the ruling class. This caused the lower classes to mount a great deal of resentment upon the elite. When the Bolsheviks seized control of the government and sought to instill a communist regime, the disintegration of the upper class was characterized by those seeking to even the score. Now the governmental majority, the proletariat needed to protect their ideals at all costs. This was accomplished by purging the citizenry of anyone opposed to their cause, many times exiling them to Siberia or simply executing them. Bulgakov exhibited this in Sharikov’s appointment to “director of the sub-section for purging the city of Moscow of stray animals (cats, etc.) of the Moscow Communal Property Administration” (110). Sharikov, who now had developed into the disorganized, hideous, and conniving creature, was commanded to eliminate those who were unequal and intolerable according to the ideals held by the Bolshevik people.

Sharikov’s full culmination was evident when he reported what he deemed to be the threatening and counterrevolutionary activities of Philip Philippovich to the government. Fortunately for Philip Philippovich, the document had crossed the desk of a loyal patient who provided a warning for the professor and informed him that no action would be taken. This event proved to be the final element leading to Sharikov’s eventual regression back to his former canine self at the hands of Dr. Bormenthal and the Professor.

The actions of Dr. Bormenthal and Philip Philippovich are indicative of the sentiment of those nostalgic of the old ways, before the Bolshevik mandates. Bulgakov was attempting to foreshadow what he felt would be an eventual counterrevolution in which the old ideals and values would reassume their prominence. The devolution of Sharikov back to the mongrel Sharik was representative of the notion that “a dog is a dog”. You can change the structure of a people, creating a body that appears on the surface to be something new and refined. However, under the surface it is still the same essence as it was before. This sentiment was presented when Philip Philippovich explained to the Criminal police and investigating officer that “[s]cience has not yet discovered methods of transforming animals into humans. I tried, but unsuccessfully, as you can see. He spoke for a while, and then began to revert to his original state” (121).

Bulgakov also conveyed the belief that once the reversion was complete, the people would realize that they were, in fact, happier before being transformed. This was evident in the last paragraphs of the book when Sharik, resting in the warmth of the professor’s apartment, expresses his thankfulness toward his situation. And as he dozes off, he is serenaded by the humming professor, carrying a tune expressing sympathy toward the imperial past. “Toward the sacred banks of the Nile...” (123).

Work Cited

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *Heart of a Dog*. Trans. Mirra Ginsburg. New York: Grove P, 1994.